

WHO'S ON THE THRONE?

Luke 9:23 is one of the most important verses in the New Testament because it contains the essence of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. ***"If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me."***

This verse has so much truth in it that today we are going to focus on just the first part. Jesus is talking here about discipleship, about following Him. He describes a disciple as ***"anyone" who "desires to come after Me."***

What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus?

Let's put this verse into context: earlier in Luke 9, Jesus fed the 5000. That story begins with Jesus trying to slip away with His disciples, and being unsuccessful – the crowds find out where he is and go out to some remote place because they want more from Jesus. He responds by teaching and healing the sick, and this time of ministry goes on late. Stomachs are grumbling, another need is present, and Jesus takes 5 buns and 2 sardines and turns it into dinner for 5000.

Incredible! Fantastic!! Truly, honestly, miraculous.

A lot of people begin to follow Jesus because of this miracle. They wanted more of that. But here is the problem, both then, and now. Is this what it means to be a follower of Jesus? Do we follow Jesus around so that He will give things to us? Does being a disciple of Jesus mean a free meal ticket?

I think in 21st century America, our Christianity has tended to become all about what we get out of it. The focus tends to be more on how God can meet our needs, what God can do for us, how "full" and "abundant" our lives can be as followers of Jesus. And, now listen carefully please because I need you to understand clearly what I am saying, those things are true: God can meet our needs, God can do amazing things in our lives, and God does lead us into "full and abundant" lives. BUT, if we pursue those things, if that is our focus, our emphasis, our concentration, Jesus says that we will miss them completely.

I think that too often we are much more comfortable with words like "self-fulfillment" and "self-actualization" than we are with the concept of "Self-denial."

Is self-fulfillment what it means to be a follower of Jesus?

Not according to verses 23-27. Jesus says that here that being His follower is not actually about what we can get for ourselves. It is about, on a daily basis, choosing not to live for ourselves – not seeking our security or comfort.

Why is that? Well, we need to remember that this passage on discipleship (Luke 9:23-27) comes right after verses 18-22. And in those verses Jesus had asked His disciples about His own identity, **"Who do you say that I am?"** Then in verse 22 He explains to them what His life mission is all about, **"The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day."**

Jesus said His life and mission were all about suffering, being rejected, dying, and being raised from the dead. So if that is what Jesus is all about, what does that say about those who **“come after”** Him, those who follow Jesus? The implication is that the disciple may anticipate the things as His Master.

It’s because of who **Jesus** is.

Jesus said you can never be a disciple unless you **“deny yourself.”** What does that mean? Well, I don’t think it simply means that you have to deny yourself something like sweets, sleep or food. It means you deny your Self, that’s Self with a capital S. Think of your “Self” as your “ego” or the “Big I.” Because we are sinners, our human nature makes us self-centered. We put the “Big I” at the center of our own little universe and everything revolves around “me.”

I can’t help but remember the final lines to the poem “Invictus” by William Ernest Henley. At the age of 12, Henley fell victim to tuberculosis of the bone. A few years later, the disease progressed to his foot, and physicians announced that the only way to save his life was to amputate directly below the knee. It was amputated when he was 25. That year, he wrote the “Invictus” poem from a hospital bed. Despite his disability, he survived with one foot intact and led an active life until his death at the age of 53. “Invictus” is Latin for “unconquered.” The poem carries a message about self mastery in the face of suffering. It’s about self determination and self will. I think it reflects the attitude of a life separated from God. Many have used this poem for inspiration including Nelson Mandela while he was imprisoned for 27 years on Robben Island. Another person who was inspired by it was Timothy McVeigh. The day he was executed for killing 168 people in the Oklahoma City bombing he left this poem to be read as his final statement. The last lines of the poem are, *“I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul.”*

Contrast that with the unselfish life that Jesus taught.

“Then Jesus said to His disciples, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.’” (Matthew 16:24).

“When He had called the people to Himself, with His disciples also, He said to them, ‘Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.’” (Mark 8:34).

“Then He said to them all, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.’” (Luke 9:23).

So what exactly does it mean to forsake or deny self? The Greek word literally means to “disregard, deny utterly, disown, or refuse.” While most translations use the word “deny”, paraphrases may offer us an easier to understand picture. Consider these; *“ignore self”, “say no to the things they want”, “must put aside his own desires and conveniences,”* and *“Has to let me lead! You’re not in the driver’s seat.”*

To deny yourself means to refuse yourself. Self is best defined as an my own welfare, interests, advancement and agenda. So, I must refuse to fulfill my own

personal agenda, my own interests, even consider our my welfare. I also must refuse to manipulate the things and the people around me to my own advantage. I can no longer be consumed with fulfilling my own goals.

It means to say NO to yourself and YES to Jesus.

What did Jesus do?

Isn't that what Jesus did? Jesus said, "**For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.**" (John 6:38). "**I can of Myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me.**" (John 5:30).

Paul says this about how Jesus denied himself (Philippians 2:5-7),

- 5 Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus,
- 6 who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God,
- 7 but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men.
- 8 And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.

Jesus made Himself of no reputation, that word is "kenosis" which means to make empty. Jesus emptied Himself; humbled Himself; He denied Himself even to the point of death on the cross.

So how should we respond to what Jesus has done? A few verses earlier Paul instructs us (Philippians 2:3-5),

- 3 Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself.
- 4 Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.
- 5 Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus,

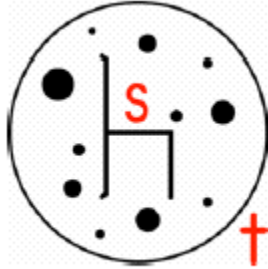
Self-denial is not glamorous, and it probably won't put you in the Fortune 500 magazines, but as far as Jesus is concerned, it is the only way to follow Him.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a pastor in Germany during the horror of Hitler. Because of his opposition to Nazi tactics, he was put into prison and later hanged as a traitor. He understood something about the cost of following Jesus. In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, he wrote, "*When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.*" And to explain that further he wrote, "*Self-denial is never just a series of isolated acts of mortification or asceticism. It is not suicide for there is an element of self-will even in that. To deny oneself is to be aware only of Christ and no more of self, to see only who goes before us and no more the road which is too hard for us.*"

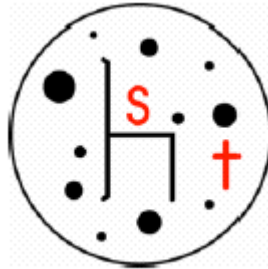
Denying your Self is not thinking harshly of your "self" or hating your "self." It is just not thinking of your Self at all.

Look at the three graphics in your notes. They are from a Campus Crusade for Christ booklet entitled *"Have you made the wonderful discovery of the Spirit-filled life?"*

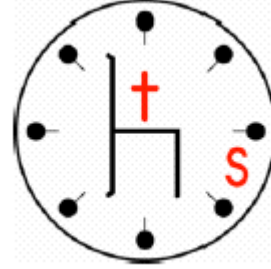
Natural Man



Carnal Man



Spiritual Man



The first circle represents a Natural Man or a person without Christ. Self, represented by a big S on the throne. The cross, or Christ, is outside the person's life. The smaller black circles represent different interests like family, work and hobbies. See how unbalanced they are? That's a self-centered life.

The second circle represents a Christian but he is a Carnal Man. The cross (Christ) is in his life but "self" is still trying to be on the throne. He is still self-directed because he hasn't "denied" himself as Jesus instructed. He is basically miserable. See how the interests are still unbalanced?

The third circle represents a Spiritual Man or a Spirit-filled person. Self has been dethroned and Jesus is on the throne. This person has made Jesus Lord by denying Self. See how balanced his life is? Think of it this way: As long as Self is on the cross, Jesus is on the throne. Whenever Self climbs back up on the throne, we put Jesus back on the cross. You see, the throne of your life is a single-seater; there's only room for one at a time.

Many people want Jesus in their lives so they won't burn in hell, but they still want to call the shots. They want to maintain control. But Jesus insists that we deny and dethrone self.

Which circle represents your life right now?